

Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, January 13, 1983

Postscripts

By JACK POST

One of the difficulties in studying history is the relating of various happenings at any given time, one to another. Studying the Pilgrims is elemental enough, once you separate them from the turmoil of their times at home in England, for when they arrived at Plymouth, except for a few Indians, they were all that were there. If you had been a visitor to Plimoth Plantation from outer space, the only activity you would have seen would be directly connected with that little colony. A dozen years after the Pilgrim landing, the Puritans were settling in to Boston, and other groups were establishing themselves along the coast from Maine to Florida. Then indeed it became difficult to distinguish the relation of one group to another; but they did interact, with our Pilgrims accepting some ideas from the Boston Puritans, disagreeing heartily on others. People were moving around, hoping to find the perfect combination of personal freedom and practical well-being.

This beginning of the great American restlessness was to drive our pioneers across the eastern hills and onto the plains, then across the greater mountain ranges to the Pacific coast, affecting first individuals, scouts like Boone and Crockett, then entire groups. John Alden of Duxbury lineage, grandson of the original Pilgrim of his name, son of Captain John Alden, Indian fighter and sea captain, seems to have been something of a free spirit, not one to be bound by the soil of the "great lots" of Duxbury. He chose not to live on the ancestral farm (perhaps there was not room among so many brothers and sisters), preferring a more stimulating existence in the growing town of Boston. Yet it is somewhat a surprise suddenly to find this young man embroiled in the witchcraft trials at Salem in 1692, when he was just shy of his 30th birthday. Surely this was a far cry from his bucolic background on the shores of the Bluefish River!

Mass hysteria had struck Salem, attacking mostly women who, afflicted with strange convulsions and unnatural behavior not unlike the physical reactions of later cults such as shakers or holy rollers, were deemed by the more staid members of the community to be affected by witchcraft. Although believed to stem from the devil, this malady must be attributed directly to some fellow mortal; so the unfortunate sufferer was persuaded by various cruel punishments to name her aggressor, often with no relation to actuality. Here according to Justin Winsor, is how the third John Alden became embroiled with Salem:

"At the time of the Salem witchcraft, Mr. Alden was sent for by the magistrates of that town upon the accusation of several poor distracted and possessed creatures or witches. Upon his examination, these wretches began their juggling tricks, falling down and crying out, and staring in the faces of the people in an impudent manner.

"The magistrates demanded of them several times, who it was of all the people in the room that affected them; one of the accusers pointed several times at one Captain Hill; but said nothing, until a man standing behind her to hold her up, stooped down to her ear, when she immediately called out 'Alden, Alden afflicted her.' Being asked if she had ever seen Alden, she replied No; but, said she, the man told her so. All were then ordered into the street, and a ring was made, when she cried out 'There stands Alden, a bold fellow with his hat on, sells powder and shot to the Indians' and more in the same manner.

"Captain Alden was then committed to custody, and his sword taken from him, for it was with this, they said, he afflicted them. He was next ordered before the magistrates at the meeting house and

placed on a chair to the open view of all the assembly. The accusers again cried out that Alden pinched them while he stood on the chair, and one of the magistrates bade the marshall hold open his hands that he might not touch them. Mr. Gidney, one of the justices, bade Capt. Alden confess and give glory to God. Capt. Alden replied that he hoped he should always give glory to God, but never would gratify the devil. He next asked why they thought he should come to that village to afflict persons that he had never seen before, and appealed to all, and particularly challenged Mr. Gidney to produce a charge against his character.

"Mr. Gidney replied that he had known him for many years, and had been to sea with him, and always believed him to be an honest man, but now saw cause to alter his opinion. He then asked Gidney what reason could be given why his looking upon him did not strike him down as well as his miserable accusers; but no reason could be given. He assured Gidney that a lying spirit was in his accusers, and that there was not a word of truth in all that they said of him.

"Capt. Alden was however committed to prison May 31, 1692, where he remained 15 weeks, when having been prevailed upon by his friends, he made his escape, and absented himself until the people recovered the use of their reason. He chose Duxbury as the place of his concealment, and here he remained in the house of one of his relatives, where he arrived late in the evening after his escape, where he saluted them with the cheerful assurance that he was come from the devil, and the devil was after him."